

**E-THEORY: AN AMALGAMATION OF LITERATURE AND  
ENVIRONMENT IN SOUTH ASIAN ENGLISH LITERATURE**

**SHIVKUMAR TUMWAD**  
SRTM UNIVERSITY,  
NANDED, INDIA

---

**Abstract**

*The recent flash flood, in June, 2013, that ravaged Uttarakhand and gave an immense pain to Indians and it has been called as a man-made disaster or an unplanned development by Man in political and social contexts. Now this has become a one of the greatest example of (Ecocriticism) Man's ultimate result of Nature's curse on Man, "a tit for tat assassination". Uttarkhand disaster dramatized its fierce, inexorable interconnectivity with human culture. This is the critical application of an ecological perspective to cultural representation. The present paper seeks to outline eco-critical examination to the relevance and presence of the non-human to human environment and vice-versa in south Asian English Literature. It aims at better understanding of how Nature acts as a complex cultural, social and political semiotic in South Asian English Literature. This article begins by offering a general introduction to Ecocriticism and its literary environmental contexts. Subsequently, in a series of subtitled sections: its development, definitions given by Ecocritical critics, applying Ecocriticism to South Asian English Literature and then the study of Ecocritical literary Theory with special reference to South Asian Women Writers. Along with these, there will be an explanation of the subjects of relationship between man and his environment and finding out their possible solutions.*

**Key words:** *Ecocriticism, First wave and Second wave of Ecocriticism, South Asian English Literature...*

---

# E-THEORY: AN AMALGAMATION OF LITERATURE AND ENVIRONMENT IN SOUTH ASIAN ENGLISH LITERATURE

-TUMWAD SHIVKUMAR DATTATRAYA

## INTRODUCTION

The term "Eco-Criticism" is a new emerged contemporary remarkable phenomenon in the area of literary theory and criticism. "E-Theory" is a propounded alternative term for Eco-Critical Theory which is also known by the names of "Green Literature", "Green Cultural Studies", "Ecopoetics", "Environmental Literary Criticism", or "Ecological Literary Studies". The eye-catching alphabet "E" in "E-Theory" stands for Ecocriticism, Ecology, Environment and even for the Earth in the discourse of global warming and climate change. As it is emerged as a separate critical theory, its scope also increased in the fields of Politics, Sociology, Philosophy, Theology, Arts, Films, Science, Technology and Engineering, etc.

Eco-criticism is an interdisciplinary approach where all sciences come together to criticize, analyse environment (as illustrated, represented in the literary works). It speaks through literature about the relationship of Man and Nature, Natural world and their behaviours and reactions towards each other and suggests various possible salutations for the correction of the contemporary environmental situations and good steps towards livelihood. It is also related with Regionalism, Landscape, wilderness and Nature Writing. The main aim of the Eco-critical Theory is to understand Nature, environment and its role in shaping the character of individual and its effect on society - Man as its unit and vice -versa. It spreads awareness about environment, ecology, climate, etc. through literature. Eco-criticism shares with critical animal studies an interest of maintaining ecosystem functioning, animal liberation in redefining humans' relationships to other species.

## DEVELOPMENT OF ECO-CRITICISM

The word “Ecocriticism” first appeared in William Rueckert’s essay “Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism” in 1978 (Barry, 249), where he focused on the application of ecology and ecological concepts to the study of literature (The Ecocriticism Reader, 107). Yet apparently it remained inactive in critical vocabulary until the 1989 Western Literature association (WLA) in Loer d’Alene, when Cheryll Glotfelty (at the time a graduate student at Cornell now Assistant Professor of Literature and Environment at the University of Nevada, Reno) not only received the term but worked for its use in the critical field which hereafter had been used as “the study of Nature writing”. Glen Love (Professor of English at the University of Oregon) too seconded the call for “Ecocriticism” at the same WLA meeting. Since that meeting in 1989 the usage of the term “Ecocriticism” has bloomed.

In the beginning, scholars working in this field of literary theory remained marginal until the early 1990 when the Association for the Study of Literature and Environment (ASLE) was established in 1992 along with the Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment (ISLE) in 1993. From the late 1990s, new branches of ASLE and affiliated organizations were started in the UK, Japan, Australia and New Zealand (ASLEC-ANZ), India (OSLE-India), Taiwan, Canada and Europe. In 1996, it is said to be officially heralded by the publication of two seminal works: *The Ecocriticism Reader*, edited by Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm and *The Environmental Imagination* by Lawrence Buell (ASLE). The pioneering work in Ecocriticism includes British Marxist critic Raymond Williams’ a critique of pastoral literature is *The Country and The City* (1973). It begins with the study of 16<sup>th</sup> century English Literature wherein he analyses the image of the country and the city and shows how those images serves as symbols for social and economic changes. Joseph Meeker’s *The Comedy of Survival: Literary Ecology and Play Ethics* (1974) is an early ecocritical text wherein he suggested that environmental crisis is caused mainly by various human cultural traditions.

According to Buell, Heise and Thornber’s seminal article “*Literature and*

*Environment*", Ecocritical Literary Theory has developed into an increasingly worldwide movement in two main waves or stages:

The FIRST wave marked by a commitment to preservationist environmentalism, an ecocentric environmental ethics, an emphasis on place-attachment at a local or bioregional level, a prioritization of the self-nature relation, and forms of literary imagination that especially reflect these;

The SECOND wave marked by a more sociocentric environmental ethics attaching special importance to issues of environmental (in)justice, to collective rather than individual experience as a primary historical force and concern in works of imagination, and increasingly to the claims of a global or planetary level of environmental belonging.

#### DEFINING ECOCRITICISM

William Howarth in his critique *"Some Principles of Ecocriticism"*, published in Cheryll Glotfelty's *The Ecocriticism Reader*, discussed "Ecocriticism"- the word's origin as "Eco" and "critic" both derive from Greek, "oikos" and "kritis", and in tandem they mean "house judge". Here "oikos/house" suggests our widest home, Nature, a place as Edward Hoagland calls and "kritis/judge" is just like a house-keeper. Thus , Ecocriticism means "a person who judges the merites and faults of writings that depict the effect of culture upon nature, with a view toward celebrating nature, berating its despoilers, and reversing their harm through political action" (*The Ecocritical Reader*, 69).

Various critics of this field of Ecocritical literary Theory has defined "Ecocriticism" as:

Discussing the emergence of "Ecocriticism" as a movement, Cheryll Glotfelty differentiates between the prefixes- "Eco" and "Enviro". She suggests "Eco" implies "interdependence" while "Enviro" implies "humans at the centre, surrounded by everything else, Nature" and defines "Ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment"

(The Ecocriticism Reader, xviii).

Lawrence Buell defines "Ecocriticism... as a study of the relationship between literature and the environment conducted in a spirit of commitment to environmentalist praxis" (The Environmental Imagination, 430). Simon Estok has defined "Ecocriticism... has distinguished itself,... firstly by the ethical stand it takes, its commitment to the natural world as an important thing rather than simply as an object of thematic study, by its commitment to making connections" (A Report Card on Ecocriticism, 220).

### ECOCRITICISM IN SOUTH ASIAN ENGLISH LITERATURE

The FIRST wave ecocriticism attached to the aesthetics and ethics of place-attachment at a local or regional scale, i.e., the concept of "house/place" or in general, "setting" (of the story, literary work) has always been of central interest to ecocriticism. The critics of ecocriticism think that this planet – "Blue Planet" – image of Earth, from outer space, is a global locale and suggests a slogan "Think globally, act locally". Wordsworth is attached to and sung the songs of English Lake District/Country of Cumberland, Thoreau's attachment to Walden Woods, Robert Frost's to New England, John Clare's to the landscape of early 19<sup>th</sup> century Northamptonshire, John Muir's rural Wisconsin, Maria Edgeworth's Ireland, Arnold Bennett's Pottery Towns, Sir Walter Scott's Waverly, and Thomas Hardy's sensitively local knowledge and place-attachment to Wessex. In the same way, R. K. Narayan's attachment to imaginary locale, Malgudi, is a reality changed with all that is warm and emotional heartbreaking, in human life.

R. K. Narayan, the father of Indian Regional Novels, has depicted the rural scenery in his almost all novels through setting the Malgudi. The River Sarayu is the main inspirational source for Chandran of *The Bachelor of Arts* (1937) who falls in love with Malathi in the first sight while wondering on the bank of the river. The River Sarayu is also inspiration for Raju of *The Guide* (1958), Savitri of *The Dark Room* (1938). The true relationship of Nature and Human being is depicted in *The Guide*. At the last part of the novel, there is the

scene of drought and no rain, no water anywhere. All villagers from Mangala rushed to Raju (Swamiji) for Heavenly fast, Raju's ultimate sacrifice to Nature for rain and food. India's agriculture mainly depends on the monsoon. This has been shown by the novelist by Raju's fast. The poor villagers think that rain can come by fasting the holyman like Raju. And for the research scholar like Marco, Mempi Caves are everything than his wife Rosie. Jagan is the true Ecocritical character from Narayan's *The Vendor of Sweets* (1967). Jagan is shown as a lover of Nature. He believed in Gandhian "Nature cure" and used a twig of Neem made into a brush each morning and also used as medicine for curing his wife Ambika's head-ache. In the last chapters, he used to sit on the weighing platform, looks away at a range of mountains beyond the green fields.

Raja Rao, one of the three pillars of Indian English Fiction, has depicted the South Indian culture and landscape by setting Kanthapura as the setting of his novel *Kanthapura* (1938), a human document and a sort of tirade, criticizing speech against inhuman values. The characters in it breathe the soil which has nurtured them. The soil has a peculiar kind of environment and atmosphere. Raja Rao described Kanthapura's natural scenery as: "high on the ghats...high on the steep mountains that face the cool Arabian Seas, up the Malabar coast is it, up Mangalore..." (P.1). Raja Rao writes about the Goddess Kenchamma in the novel as "Kenchamma is our goddess. Great and bounteous is she...never has she failed us in grief. If rains come not, you fall at her feet and say, 'Kenchamma you are not kind to us. Our field is full of younglings'" (p.2-3).

Nature, environment and narrative serve as an essential background in Kannada writer U. R. Ananthamurthy's *Samskara* (1965) which was translated by A. K. Ramanujan in English. *Samskara* is the depiction of the natural socio-cultural and socio-religious life and environment of the South Indian village Durvasapura, a beautiful and greenery place near the free-flowing river Tunga. The love-making and the sensual enjoyment scenes of Acharya and Chandri also takes place in the forest and becomes the sacred, holy place for them. Unanthamurthy compared the beauty of Chandri with the "Apsaras" and the everlasting, perennial Tunga River. The novelist says that just as the river

washes away the sins of the sinner and the saint, and who never dries up, Chandri is also such an entity, creature. When Acharya regains consciousness, he finds himself under the star-studded sky at midnight. Then he enjoys a bath in a stream and frolics with a calf.

An age-old novel of the soil in Malayalam Literature is Thakazhi Sivasankara Pillai's *Chemmeen* (1955) which is also an example of Ecocriticism. The setting of the novel is in the coastal areas of Kerala. The present novel portrays the typical fishing community with its poverty, superstitions, and love for old customs and the environment. Pillai has given the vivid description of the environment, Nature, countryside, sea, meadows, farms, lakes, etc. As the villagers of Kanthapura believes in Goddess Kenchamma, here, Goddess Katalamma. The fishermen have a firm belief in the awe-inspiring presence of the Goddess Katalamma. They say that she resides in the depth of the sea and it is impossible to predict about her moods and curse. Whenever, someone violates some moral code of conduct of the Nature and environment, she becomes angry and sends dreadful creatures on the sea. The novelist has presented the theme of tragic-love in the natural background where the two lovers – a Muslim boy, Pareekutti and a girl Karuthamma – express their love to each other. The objects of the Nature like sea, fish, sand, moonlight, stars, palm trees, flowers, gardens and grooves, etc., become a witness to their Platonic love.

One of the leading present living writers of Indian English Literature is Anita Desai. She has added a new dimension to the achievement of Indian Women writers in English Fiction. We cannot avoid the woman as a subject because women have a significant place in her novels. She uses and compares environmental and natural images such as birds, plants, and animals with her characters in her novels. She uses external landscape to portray the inner psyche of the characters such as Baba is described as a harmless spider in her novel *Clear Light of Day* (1980), the island people as goats as they listen to Moses in *Where Shall We Go This Summer* (1975), Monisha compares herself as she is a caged bird and finally commits suicide to free herself in *Voices in the City* (1965).

Repeated cries of the peacock and the cries of the inner-self of the protagonist, Maya, is obsessed with death in *Cry, The Peacock* (1963). The landscape or natural imagery is described as "But there was a moon, a great moon of hot, beaten copper, of molten brass, living and throbbing like a bloody human organ, a great, full-bodied woman, who had mounted the sky in passion, driven the silly stars away from her, while she pulsed and throbbed, pulsed and glowed across the the breathless sky,...Look, look, there is a moon in the sky" (p.51). Anita Desai portrays Nanda Kaul and her grand-child Raka's love for birds, animals, Nature and environment in her novel *Fire on the Mountain*, where she depicts the natural scenery of Chandigarh's lakes, Kasauli Hills, and enchanting places of Kashmir including Dal Lake, Nagin Lake, Shalimar or Nishat Garden, etc. and forest fires and their effect on human beings. Anita Desai brings vivid picture of Bombay (now Mumbai) and the glimpse of the panorama of rural India, e.g., the village Thul, near Alibagh, and its markets in her Guardian Children's Fiction Award winning novel for children *The Village by the Sea: An Indian Family Story* (1982). The novel deals with substantial and solid human action for saving or destroying Nature, environment. It also depicts the life of fishermen, their will's, pride's fall (what we call in general, "Man proposes but God disposes") and their relationship with Sea, Sea Goddess, sea boats, etc. Here we have a vivid description of Coconut Day Celebration by fishermen.

Nature is shown as both the preserver and destroyer in Kamala Markandaya's novel *Nectar in a Sieve: A Novel of Rural India* (1954). Rukmani, the narrator of the novel, reveals the tragic vagaries of Nature by spoiling the sweet harmony of a peasant's life. This is just because of human degradation, landlordism, and evils of industrialism. Rukmani records: "But the change now came into my life, into all our lives, blasting its way into our village, seemed wrought in the twinkling of an eye" (p.25). One of the parts of this novel is "The Flood" which illustrates Nature's curse and control over human beings. She says, "Nature is like a wild animal that you have trained to work for you. So long as you are vigilant and walk warily with thought and care, so long will it give you its aid; but look away for an instance, be headless and forgetful, and



it has you by the throat" (*An Anthology of Indian English Prose*, 109).

The Ecocritical Literary Theory is started in early 1990s in the American and European world and now-a-days it is gaining popularity in India. As the Britishers's have Romantic Ecocriticism (belong to the Nature poetry of Romantic Period), in the same way, India has its own Romantic Ecocriticism through the writings of the poetry of Toru Datt and Sarojini Naidu, etc. The child of the green valley of the Ganges Toru Datt's love for Nature, environment comes out so vividly in her volume of poems *Ancient Ballads and Legend of Hindustan* (1882). She says through her poems that how the Nature works for her as her healing spiritual power.

The best of the later green poet or poetess is undoubtedly Sarojini Naidu, the Nightingale of India, and the Cookoo Bird of India. Themes of her poetry are mostly deal with Nature, in its human context, and man, in his natural context. She has outstandingly recaptured the early Indian responses to our natural environment. She is truly a lover of Nature, Indian flora and fauna. Nature is the external environment of men and animals, living and nonliving things. For her Nature is a sanctuary of peace, a source of sensuous pleasure, object of beauty, and a fount of perennial joy in her poems such as 'Vasant Panchami', 'In a Time of Flowers', 'In Praise of Gulmohur Blossoms', 'Juhu Sands', etc.

One of the most important perspectives of SECOND wave Ecocritical Literary Theory is the theme of scientific investigation of the natural world with indigenous forms of knowledge. The suitable example of this type of Ecocritical work is Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* (2004). Set in the Sundarbans, in the Bay of Bengal, *The Hungry Tide* highlights the potentially catastrophic cost to people of prioritizing animals and the many ambiguities of human-nonhuman interactions. Piyali, an American marine biologist and an Ecologist of Indian descent comes to study endangered species of the Sundarban archipelago on the Bay of Bengal. She contracts a local guide, named Fokir, who is illiterate but intimately familiar with local topography, flora, and fauna through lifelong

inhabitation and experience.

To sum up, Ecocritical Literary Theory is started as an organized movement in the early 1990s, today, involved in all the fields of the environmental humanities including history, ethics, theology, film, science and technology. Now a day, its rapid growth, progress is gaining worldwide popularity in every parts of the continent. This theory views individual as its part, a member of the Ecology, Ecosystem and shifts its focus from socio-cultural relations to natural relations. The writers, knowingly or unknowingly, show a great interest in describing Nature, its landscape, and environment and its consequences including Nature's calamity, disaster. We can also study more and more works under this field.

#### WORKS CITED

- Barry, Peter. Ecocriticism. *Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. New Delhi: Viva Books, 2008.
- Buell, Lawrence. *The Environmental Imagination*. Harvard: Harvard University Press, 1996.
- Buell, Lawrence, Ursula K. Heise, and Karen Thornber. Literature and Environment. *The Annual Review of Environment and Resources*, 2011. 36: 417-40.
- Desai, Anita. *Cry, the Peacock*. New Delhi: Orient Paperbacks, 1983.
- Dhawan, R. K. *Commonwealth Fiction*. New Delhi: Classical Publishing Compony, 1988.
- Estok, Simon. *A Report Card on Ecocriticism*. AUMLA 96 (Nov., 2001), 200-238.
- George, K. M. *Comparative Indian Literature*. Madras: Kerala Sahitya Academy, 1984.
- Glotfelty, Cheryll and Harold Fromm. *The Ecocritical Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*. Athens and London: University of Georgia Press, 1996.
- Meeker, Joseph. *The Comedy of Survival: Literary Ecology and Play Ethics*. Arizona: University of Arizona Press, 1997.
- Narayan, R. K. *The Guide*. Chennai: Indian Thought Publications, 2007, rpt.  
\_\_\_\_\_. *The Vendor of Sweets*. Chennai: Indian Thought Publications, 2007, rpt.
- Raja Rao. *Kanthapura*. New Delhi: Orient Paperbacks, 1971.
- Williams, Raymond. *The Country and the City*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973.